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ABSTRACT

Targeted by the "California Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Affairs" in 1946, Frances Eisenberg subsequently was dismissed from the Los Angeles Public School System after 20 years of teaching. In 1947, the "Tenney Committee" introduced eight bills in the California legislature to prevent the teaching of controversial subjects in elementary schools and to increase legislative control over textbooks. Eisenberg was charged with "indoctrinating with subversive ideologies" in the small rural agricultural community of Canoga Park, California. In spite of strong parental and student support, Eisenberg, a teacher of journalism and English and the faculty advisor for the school newspaper, became the target for suspicion and hostility during a period of nationalism. Known anti-Semites were called as witnesses against her as well as students who had never been in her classes. Although the board of education appointed a committee which investigated the charges and completely cleared her, she lost her position in 1954. During this period the superintendent of the Los Angeles Schools required teachers to read a booklet on Americanism and to sign a loyalty oath. (NL)

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Frances Eisenberg at Canoga Park High School, 1946:

Prelude to McCarthyism in the Los Angeles Public Schools

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> On the afternoon of October 2nd, my fellow teacher, Mrs. Blanche Bettington and I, were summoned from our classes at Canoga Park High School by our principal and asked to come to his office where a county sheriff, showing his badge, served us subpoenas to appear at 10 a.m., the following Wednesday at the California State Building, "as witnesses in an investigation before the Tenney Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities."[1]

Not quite a typical day at school. Mrs. Frances Eisenberg was describing developments in her first experience as a target of investigation by California's Fact- Finding Committee on Un-American Affairs. How did all of this come about? In order to understand how this could occur, we must consider the political climate emerging in 1946.

David Marden's comprehensive study of education and the Cold War hinted at what was going on:

> The Cold War had state and local phases, many of which predated McCarthyism. . . State legislatures, for instance, evinced a healthy interest in subversion in education well before a junior Senator from Wisconsin made a name for himself by maintaining that he had unearthed Communists working in important Government posts.[2]

The years following World War II were marked by a pervasive concern about loyalty and internal security, and American education was drastically

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[1] Untitled Paper, Canoga Park Files, Eisenberg Papers.

[2] David Marden: The Cold War and American Education (unpublished dissertation, University of Kansas) p. 4

affected. In The Great Fear, a major study of the McCarthy period, David Caute noted that "the American teaching profession has invariably stood as a target for suspicion and aggression at times of superpatriotic sensitivity."[3] Yet those who study education have paid inadequate attention to this phenomenon and its impact on every aspect of public schooling: teachers, students, administrators, parents, curricula, and more. These related issues become evident in Mrs. Frances Eisenberg's experiences in the Los Angeles school system between 1946 and 1954. California's Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities was particularly eager to locate these subversives in the field of education, and Mrs. Eisenberg was one of the people whom they were seeking.

After more than twenty years of teaching in the Los Angeles Public Schools, Mrs. Frances Eisenberg was dismissed in 1954. She had refused to answer questions before what was referred to as the Burns Committee---the California Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Affairs, then chaired by Senator Hugh Burns. But this was not Mrs. Eisenberg's first struggle with McCarthyism in the schools; there had been a foreshadowing of this turn of events a few years before. This paper focuses on that earlier situation.

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[3]David Caute, The Great Fear (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 403.

In October of 1946, Mrs. Eisenberg and a colleague, Mrs. Bettington, were called from their classrooms at Canoga Park High School, and were summoned to appear before the same committee (then chaired by Senator Jack Tenney and known as the Tenny Committee). The teachers were accused of imposing Communist doctrines, and of "improperly influencing" the school newspaper.[4]

> PARENTS FIGHT RED TEACHINGS
>
> Irate parents moved yesterday to rid Canoga Park High School of Communistic (sic) influences they say are being spread among upper class students by two women teachers...Action came after witnesses gave sworn testimony before the State Senator Jack B. Tenney committee on un-American activities that the teachers, Mrs. Frances Eisenberg and Mrs. Blanche Bettington, were indoctrinating students with subversive idealogies.[5]

At the time of the hearing, Mrs. Eisenberg had been teaching at Canoga Park for ten years, and Mrs. Bettington had been teaching there for twenty-three. Both teachers taught English and Journalism including a course called "Senior Problems." Mrs. Eisenberg was the faculty advisor for the student newspaper, and Mrs. Bettington worked with the student government. In addition, they sponsored the World Friendship Club which

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[4]Report to the Board of Education on the Review of Evidence and Findings in the Canoga Park Inquiry, Eisenberg Papers, Special Collections, UCLA Library, p. 2.

[5]Los Angeles Examiner; October 12, 1946. Canoga Park Files, Eisenberg Papers.

had been established at the high school after the World War I.

Canoga Park is about 40 minutes from downtown Los Angeles. Mrs. Eisenberg recently explained that in the 1940's Canoga Park was quite rural and agricultural. The community included southern whites who had moved to California and Mexican immigrant workers. There was a "redneck" mentality present in the area that included many who hated Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jews, Mexicans, and more. She recalled an awareness that fall that her classroom had been searched over the summer; her books and magazines were rearranged.[6]

Mrs. Eisenberg, Mrs. Bettington, and their principal were subpoenaed to the hearing which was attended by about 150 people. Mrs. Eisenberg noticed students, alumni, and some residents of Canoga Park including one family whose anti-Semitism was well known.[7] Mrs. Eisenberg was asked to describe two of the classes she was teaching: Senior Problems and Journalism. She presented the official Board of Education syllabus, and told the committee that she had followed those guidelines. The Senior Problems class was designed for students not going on to college, and it was here that there was particular emphasis on human relations and life problems. Such a non-traditional course could easily generate anxiety for some parents.

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[6] Interviews, May 1983
April 1987.

[7] Ibid. Untitled paper, Canoga Park Files.

The next portion of questioning took a different approach.

> Mr. Tenney then called attention to the fact that I was listed as a director of the People's Educational Center. I informed the committee that I had been a delegate to PEC from the Teachers' Union. He asked me whether I know that a number of persons connected with this school were communists. I replied that as far as our union was concerned it was an adult school offering many different courses which were purely voluntary.[8]

Mrs. Bettington was questioned about her classes as well. She was asked if she were indoctrinating her students. She told the committee that ideas were discussed ". . . freely and democratically in her class and that she reserved the right to express her opinion as an opinion."[9]

Students, parents, and others were also questioned. Mrs. Eisenberg noticed that when any response was unclear, Mr. Tenney provided words to help prove the charges.[10] One student who had never been in either teachers' classes accused them of using communist newspapers. One of Mrs. Eisenberg's students testified that she had condemned Life, Time, Reader's Digest, and had praised New Republic. A father stated that his daughter ". . . had developed un-American ideas while taking a course from Mrs. Bettington."[11] The printer of the school newspaper was asked about

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., p. 3.

[11] Edward Barrett, The Tenney Committee (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1951), p. 159.

comments made by students who were connected to the paper.

Within a few weeks there was a public response to the charges against the teachers. Students, parents, and alumni wrote letters of support. A former student then stationed in Korea wrote to the Board of Education when he learned about the hearings. He felt it was his duty to write since Mrs. Bettington had been his Senior Problems teacher, and he had had Mrs. Eisenberg for Senior English.

> There could not be any other teachers that took a greater interest in their work, in the school, and in the efforts of the student body. It is through their extra effort that Canoga Park High School is known not only as the best school in the city system, but also for its student government throughout the nation.[12]

He also wrote about learning American values from both teachers.

> In both Mrs. Bettington and Mrs. Eisenberg one could see the sincere interest in making good citizens out of indifferent teenagers. . . [I]f we love our country as we profess to do [we] should be willing to seek out the bad points in our every day living and try to correct them not only by speech, but by actions. If you believe that this is wrong and un-American then you would be tearing down the whole principle of Democracy.[13]

During this time, the Teachers' Union both locally and nationally expressed concern about the Tenney Committee's tactics.

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[12]Letter, Henry Labaqui to the Board of Education, Canoga Park Files, Eisenberg Papers.

[13]Ibid.

American Federation of Teachers Secretary-Treasurer Irvin Kuenzli questioned the whole procedure which had been followed.

> I have found nothing in the testimony at the hearing to justify the charges against these teachers. On the contrary, I was amazed that any responsible committee of a state legislature would bring severe charges of this type against public school teachers on such unfounded and flimsy rumors and reports.[14]

The Board of Education appointed a committee of school principals to examine the charges and the testimony presented at the Tenney Committee. Considerable effort was made to ensure that all points of view were presented at the hearings. "The testimony indicated that the classroom of these teachers were scenes of many spirited discussions that sometimes carried over into the next class period and frequently carried over into discussions around the dinner table."[15] Some faculty who testified expressed concern that these discussions could be emotionally upsetting to the students, making them ". . . unsettled in their beliefs."[16]

The Board of Education Committee found that the charges against the teachers were unwarranted.

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[14]Letter, Irvin Kuenzli (probably sent to LA Chapter, AFT) November 30, 1946, Canoga Park Files.

[15]Ibid.; Report to the Board of Education, p. 2.

[16]Ibid., p. 3.

> The evidence does not support the complaint that these teachers imposed Communist doctrines upon students in their classes, or that they improperly influenced the policy or articles of the school newspaper.[17]

Clearance from the Board of Education did not end all the suspicion that some felt about Mrs. Eisenberg. Tenney labeled the report a "whitewash."

"In 1947 the Tenney Committee introduced eight bills to prevent the teaching of controversial subjects in elementary schools and to increase legislative control over textbooks. . ."[18] One of those bills passed, and the legislature also created a special committee chaired by Senator Dilworth to investigate education issues. The Dilworth Committee pressured the Los Angeles Superintendent of Schools, Alexander Stoddard, to take action to weed out subversive teachers. Stoddard required that ". . . teachers read a pamphlet on Americanism, and sign an oath." Further, he asked parents and citizens to report suspicions of subversive teaching.[19]

Mrs. Eisenberg was arbitrarily transferred to Fairfax High School where she was again to become a target of suspicion. As an officer of the Los Angeles Federation of Teachers, and then as editor of the Union newspaper,

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Caute, p. 426.

[19] Caute, p. 427.

she was hard to ignore. Clearly, Mrs. Eisenberg's story only begins in Canoga Park.

A study of Mrs. Eisenberg's case provides an opportunity to examine social and political events beyond the classroom, notably civil liberties, teacher unionism, academic freedom, and peace education. Mrs. Eisenberg's extensive files make it possible to survey these and other issues that developed during and after her tenure in the public schools. For these reasons her story deserves further attention. In addition there is a special message about her personal courage and her commitment to students and public education that comes through even at a point of crisis in her teaching career.

Mrs. Eisenberg will be 82 years old this summer. She is active in the Los Angeles Association of Retired Teachers and she writes for their newspaper. Last June, Mrs. Eisenberg was invited to speak at the fortieth anniversary reunion of the class of 1946. Several of the students in the class had stayed in touch with her over all those years. One student, who has worked for the state department for the past fifteen years, returned to Los Angeles from Washington for the reunion. In her remarks, she expressed good feelings about the quality of education which the class of 1946 had received. Those students were able to distinguish between the principles of

democracy in action, and its antithesis which they saw being carried out in the early forms of McCarthyism.[20] It is interesting to imagine how the Tenney Committee would have interpretted the class reunion--and its special guest.

[20]Telephone interview with Mrs. Eisenberg, April 22, 1987.

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